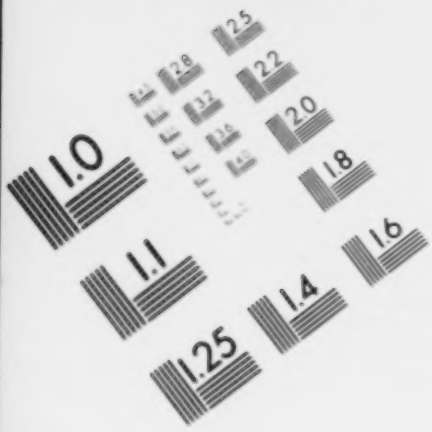
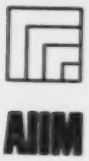


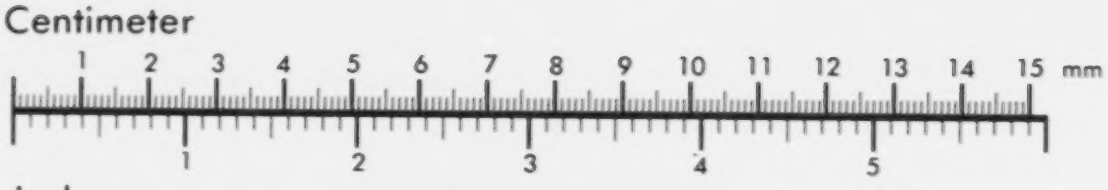


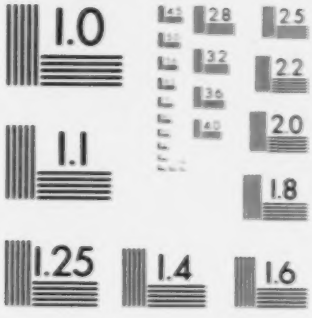
AIIM

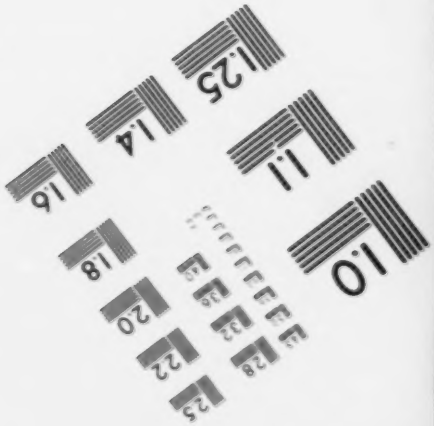
Association for Information and Image Management

1100 Wayne Avenue, Suite 1100
Silver Spring, Maryland 20910

301/587-8202







MANUFACTURED TO AIIM STANDARDS
BY APPLIED IMAGE, INC.

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 408 063 PS 025 465

AUTHOR	Kelly, Alison L.; Berthelsen, Donna C.
TITLE	Teachers Coping with Change: The Stories of Two Preschool Teachers.
REPORT NO	ISSN-1320-6648
PUB DATE	97
NOTE	10p.; For the complete proceedings, see PS 025 459.
AVAILABLE FROM	Journal of Australian Research in Early Childhood Education |c v1 p62-70 1997
PUB TYPE	Journal Articles (080) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Educational Change; Foreign Countries; Journal Writing; Personal Narratives; Preschool Education; *Preschool Teachers; Stress Variables; *Teacher Attitudes; Teacher Role; *Teaching Conditions; Teaching Experience
IDENTIFIERS	Australia (Queensland)

ABSTRACT

In this study, 12 preschool teachers in Queensland, Australia were given opportunities to record and describe their work within their specific teaching context, as well as within the wider contexts of the school campus and the educational and social system. Subjects kept a reflective journal each day over a 2-week period, and entries frequently identified the influence that mandated educational change had on daily work. The keeping of the journal and a follow-up conversation enabled the creation of teachers' stories about their experiences. Two of the teachers' stories, chosen because they encompassed many of the themes present in the other stories, illustrated that the role of the preschool teacher in Queensland is in a process of redefinition. These teachers believed that it was becoming increasingly difficult to meet their personal expectations about the role of early childhood education, with teaching responsibilities increasingly crowded by other work demands. The teachers found in difficult to integrate their work into the primary school organizational structure because they were accustomed to considerably more autonomy, and they were unclear about their role in relation to their associated school. A predominant theme in their stories was that the role of early childhood teacher has been affected by the elimination of the Preschool Directorate in the Queensland Education Department. This loss of representation and practical support resulted in feelings of powerlessness to contest school and social demands. (Contains 9 references.) (EV)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

ED 408 063

TEACHERS COPING WITH CHANGE: THE STORIES OF TWO PRESCHOOL TEACHERS

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
M. Fleer
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

Alison L Kelly and Donna C Berthelsen
Queensland University of Technology

ABSTRACT

In this paper, the impact of change on two Queensland preschool teachers is reported. Twelve preschool teachers were given opportunities to record and describe their work within their specific teaching context, as well as within the wider contexts of the school campus and the educational and social system. A reflective journal was kept daily over a two-week period and entries frequently identified the influence that mandated educational change had on daily work. The keeping of the reflective journal and a follow-up conversation enabled the creation of teachers' stories about their experiences. In this paper, two of the stories are explored. The stories are illuminating and assist in an understanding of the dimensions and conditions of teachers' work, and of current issues impacting on early childhood education.

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this research was to develop a clearer understanding of the impact of mandated educational change on teachers' work experiences and to consider what responses are needed by teachers in order to cope with the growing complexity of the workplace. The research was initiated because of increasing evidence that teachers are under stress. Regular reports appearing in professional magazines confirm that teachers' work is increasingly demanding and complex. The pace of educational change has engendered concern in teachers at all educational levels, including those in early childhood settings. This research has sought to identify, as a first step, the issues currently impacting on early childhood teachers in their work.

Jordell (1987) noted that educational systems and structures have an important bearing upon teacher behaviour, theories, and beliefs. He proposed that teachers' experiences can be mapped on three levels: the classroom level, the school level, and the societal level. This model acknowledges the interdependence of the three levels whilst also recognising that events occurring at the broader levels (school and society) directly impact on daily teaching experiences. Jordell (1987) emphasised that teachers develop certain ways of teaching, survival and coping strategies as they accommodate changes occurring at the school and societal levels.

Teachers' work

Social changes and economic imperatives have severely challenged the teaching profession over the last decade within Australia. Proposals for educational reform have been linked to broader social, economic and political agendas and these have resulted in major organisational changes. In the report, *Focus on Schools* (1990), the Queensland Department of Education was influenced by knowledge about how modern organisations operated efficiently and effectively, and accepted that successful organisations are those which incorporate the capacity to manage ongoing change into their operations.

Schools are being asked to address a multitude of social issues in their curricula and this leads to pressures that crowd the teacher's day. Key functions of the Queensland Department of

PS 025465

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Education's Social Justice Policy detailed in *Focus on Schools* (1990), included developing policies for students with special needs, Aboriginal and Islander education, gender equity, multicultural students and socio-economically disadvantaged students. Such policies are valued by teachers, but schools have been expected to implement new policies for the large part by using existing financial resources which have been inadequate (Westwood, 1991). Policy initiatives have meant that increased knowledge and skills are required by teachers to take responsibility for implementation, with a resultant increase in workloads.

The work of an early childhood teacher can be characterised by high intensity and by a multiplicity of interactions and relationships. Teachers work with many adults (parents, other staff, teacher aides, members of the school community and staff) and young children at various stages of development. The early childhood philosophy of education sees the origin of the curriculum as stemming from children's needs and interests across developmental areas, rather than through prespecifed and sequenced content in specific areas of knowledge. This type of curriculum is not common at other educational levels. Early childhood teachers believe that they frequently have to justify their educational philosophy and practice to other educators and the community.

Context for the research: preschool education in Queensland

In Queensland during the 1970s, steps were taken by way of election promises to create a preschool directorate within the Department of Education. A system of voluntary free preschool education for all four year-old children was introduced. The government established that preschools would be located on the grounds of existing primary schools but would operate as part of a Preschool Directorate. This represented a major innovation in the field of preschool education in Australia (Ashby, 1980). Preschool education in the 1970s enjoyed a high level of acceptance and support by the government and general community. It was accepted in the proposal for preschool programs that the curriculum would focus on children's developmental needs and would not be a downward extension of the primary school curriculum. A strong belief existed that if early childhood principles and philosophies were to penetrate the Queensland education system then preschools required the opportunity to demonstrate their potential. Rather than domination by a prescribed syllabus, preschool teachers were encouraged to be autonomous and develop their own program which best suited the individual needs of the children.

A peer-level advisory support system was set up and advisory personnel were drawn from the ranks of teachers. Ashby (1980) described advisers as peers who were readily available to advise, assist, counsel and provide constructive criticism to other preschool teachers. They were not a supervisory team who could order or demand obedience. They were there to assist the individual teacher in an appropriate way, be it by supporting the inexperienced teacher in adjusting to new situations, or by supporting and challenging the experienced teacher to try more complex strategies. Ashby (1980) noted that the maintenance of motivation among teaching staff and a focus on quality programs were of major importance. The capacity of any organisation to maintain quality depends on the enthusiasm, interest and innovation of the staff.

Research aim

This research aimed to develop an understanding of the nature of preschool teachers' work in a period of socio-political change and to identify issues and conditions in teachers' work which are generating concern and stress.

Research methodology

In exploring the work of the teacher in early childhood education, a methodology was needed that was sensitive to the lived reality of teachers in this field. In order to capture the subtleties of teachers' experiences, the methods used to collect and analyse data were associated with personal narratives or stories (Kuzmic, 1994).

PS 025165

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Teachers shared their work experiences and reflected on how changes in the wider educational context had impacted on their teaching role. A daily journal, a diagrammatic representation of their teaching experiences and a follow-up conversation with pairs of teachers enabled the creation of personal stories of teaching experiences. The journal keeping was a valuable tool and provided a record of teachers' work and teachers' reactions and interpretations of events.

The conversations were an extension of the reflections recorded in the journals and diagrams. The participants were asked to reflect on the themes produced by the collective journals and to comment on their personal relevance. They were asked to consider and identify the changes they had observed in the wider educational context since their teaching career began, and to comment on the extent that these had impinged on their teaching role. Apart from this general guide, the participants controlled the flow of topics and were encouraged to extend their responses. The responses given continually informed the evolving conversation (Paget, 1983). Hollingsworth (1992) noted that conversational methods allow for continuous cycles of critique and knowledge construction.

Participants

At a series of preschool teacher network meetings, the purpose and the nature of the research was explained and teachers were invited to participate in the research. Twelve teachers employed in a metropolitan area agreed to participation. All of these teachers were women and they ranged in age from 26 to 61 years, with teaching experience ranging from 5 to 20 years.

This paper presents the stories of just two of these teachers because it was not feasible to present all 12 teachers' stories in the one paper. The stories of Bettine and Elizabeth were selected as the issues which they raised appeared to encompass the broad range of concerns identified by the wider group. The stories of experience of the two teachers presented in this paper were developed from the journal entries, the interviews and diagrammatic representations.

Research procedure

After accepting an invitation to be involved in the study, the teachers kept a journal focussed on their daily work experiences for an agreed two-week period, which was towards the end of a school term. They were also asked to diagrammatically represent their experiences at the end of the journal recording period. A month after the journal records were made, the participants were given feedback on their journals and participated in an interview. The interviews were a discourse between pairs of teachers and the researcher, and took place at the preschool centres. A total of six interviews occurred. The interviews were audio-taped and then transcribed.

The information from the journal and the interview transcription was integrated to tell a story of each teacher's experience and examined in the light of Jordell's (1987) forms of influences: classroom, school and societal. Exploring these teachers' views about the conditions and consequences of their work generated an understanding of their current teaching practices, and the effects of educational and organisational change on their teaching roles.

STORIES OF EXPERIENCE — TWO TEACHERS TALK ABOUT THEIR WORK

Bettine and Elizabeth: An introduction

Bettine is concerned about the future of preschool education. She recognises that at times she feels under pressure, insecure and uncertain about her work. Bettine is married and in her 40s. She has three children under eleven, and has to juggle her school commitments to accommodate family needs and lifestyle. Bettine completed her teacher training in Queensland, teaching at a high school before changing to preschool education. Her teaching experience covers 20 years, with 11 of those being in the preschool setting. She has been at

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

her current school for one term and teaches in the afternoon session only. The primary school, of which her preschool unit is a part, is situated in a lower socio-economic area and serves about 225 children. A special education unit is attached. The preschool unit is a single unit meeting the needs of about 35 children.

Elizabeth is extremely committed to her job and to the field of early childhood education. Elizabeth is in her forties, is divorced, and has four adult children. Elizabeth did her teacher training in Queensland and has a Diploma of Teaching and a Bachelor of Education. She has been teaching in the preschool setting for 10 years and has taught at her current school for four years. Elizabeth is the teacher in charge at this centre. This school serves about 430 children and the double-unit preschool has an enrolment of about 97 children. Recently returning from a year overseas, Elizabeth is astounded by the changes that have taken place in the preschool setting and in the Education Department in general. She believes that changes have occurred at an inordinate pace and that teachers are having great difficulty accommodating these into their daily work.

Teachers' experiences at the classroom level

For Bettine, the major concerns at the classroom level were related to time pressures, daily programming and planning of curriculum activities, and ensuring quality interactions with children and parents.

> *Time pressures are a definite stressor for me. My personal time is pressured as well. I am constantly looking at my watch. I have changed from running a full day session to running a half day afternoon session. I am finding the discipline of moving my full day program into two and a half hours each day quite telling. Upon reflection, I can see that I have been struggling to condense what I once did in an all day program into the smaller time slot, and it does not work.*
>
> *Interacting with parents and building relationships with them is important to me because it assists my knowledge and understanding of the children. I must admit though that despite my years of teaching it is often the parents who get me down, especially in the disadvantaged areas in which I have worked. I do all I can to support the children, but I cannot perform the role of a social worker.*

For Elizabeth, concerns at the classroom level relate to programming for children with special needs, keeping abreast of the increasing demands of the job and implementing programs based on children's spontaneous play experiences — a philosophy of learning she strongly believes in.

> *I find meeting the needs of children a challenge and I am very open minded about integrating children with special needs in the preschool. I have a positive view about integration and I think that it is good for children to have experiences with children who are different from themselves. A child who has Down Syndrome and two children who have extreme language problems are part of my enrolment. As well as trying to learn sign language, I am as part of my commitment to the children who have special needs, teaching songs in sign language to the whole group. I admit that I sometimes feel inadequate in this role. Lack of support is the issue. It is difficult to feel empowered when you are on your own.*
>
> *I value an event-based philosophy which has taken me years to develop. Much time is spent implementing ideas and collecting resources to follow up children's ideas. Unfortunately, there is nowhere for me to get feedback or support for this approach to develop my ideas further. The disbanding of the Preschool Directorate has meant that inservice workshops are no longer*

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

provided and this has stifled the skill and knowledge development of teachers.

Teachers' experiences at the school level

When reflecting on concerns at the school level, Bettine found additional teaching tasks a pressure. She found the increasing number of professional meetings demanding. Changes in the functioning of preschools within the school and education system were of concern and had an unsettling effect on her work.

> *I am involved in extra school events such as organising school camps and professional development meetings. Next week I've got a meeting on every single afternoon! I feel that I absolutely must attend because of all the rapid changes that are happening. If I don't go and have a say there could be a policy change!* In her journal she reflected on the week she just had, *'This week I had four night meetings to attend and I think I should learn to say NO more often.' The meetings may be network meetings, talks by early childhood experts, or school inservice meetings. I believe that even though these take up so much of my personal time it is vital to attend in order to keep abreast of current information. I attend conferences held during holidays to keep in touch with preschool and early childhood information. Now I believe we have to go to these and have a say otherwise we will lose everything.*
>
> *I am very concerned about the changes taking place and the stories that abound, including worries about transfers, discontinuation of holidays, and the future of preschool education. A job in a preschool was once very secure and supported. We feel vulnerable now. Teachers are worried and afraid. It is all the changes! Every time you speak to another preschool teacher they have another story about what is changing in the system and they are not nice stories, and so there is a level of fear. Early Childhood Consultants and Regional Preschool Officers were once available to approach for communication and support. There seems to be nobody fulfilling this role now, who do you approach now?*

Elizabeth is actively involved in school planning and decision making, but is finding it difficult adjusting to changes in support services within the system. Relationships with other colleagues and with parents are also identified as significant work issues.

> *I have always had a desire to be actively involved in the life of the school, but I am finding that the school meetings I am required to attend are never-ending. During the fortnight of the journal recording, for example, I began work at the centre at half past seven each morning, and spent nine of my afternoons at meetings, workshops, or home visits. Most evenings were taken up with school work, planning, and preparation for meetings. Lunch breaks were taken up with preparation and organisation.*
>
> *It is good that schools have been put in a position where the preschool has to be recognised and included in more school planning. Unfortunately, this inclusion often just means more work for preschool teachers. I have felt the effect of the huge jump from being involved in very little at the school to helping to write School Development Plans, Discipline plans and Human Relationship Education Policies. The extra workload is enormous.*

Teachers' experiences at the societal level

The major societal influences impacting directly on Bettine's work related to the emergence of child care centres and the changing needs of families and their care/educational requirements. The community's understanding of the importance of early childhood

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

education and curriculum also influenced Bettine's work and her perceptions of how her professional work was valued.

> *I understand the perceived threat of child care centres to preschool centres, and as a working parent I acknowledge that child care centres are attractive. Having children for time periods of 8.00–6.00 is very different from the preschool routine. It is very exhausting. Several children in my group attend child care as well and are very tired and easily frustrated during the preschool day.*
>
> *In terms of understanding the value of preschool education, I have experienced that many parents are not concerned with what happens at preschool. They think it is marvellous and enjoy the activities but believe that Year One is the crucial year. In Year One, the parents value the products of the school day such as work sheets. The Year One teacher is pressured to leave the play experiences and focus on work sheets as 'proper' work. Early childhood education and its value has faded away from the public eye. Once, it was really big time — it was important to the community.*

Elizabeth has identified how the political climate has impacted on the education system and the valuing of preschool education. She focuses on the need to advocate at the societal level for changes in the school and classroom settings so that teachers are supported in their efforts to provide quality education for all children.

> *It was politics that started the push for early childhood education and preschool centres, and that this was as a result of advocacy by strong people. The decision to disband the Preschool Division in the Department has many implications for the early childhood philosophy. It is upon the shoulders of preschool teachers to advocate for the maintenance of early childhood services. I hold the view that if preschool teachers believe in the needs of the young children they teach, then they have to take on the difficult task of being advocates. Many principals don't see the preschool as an educational institution or preschool teachers as educators, so this is not easy.*
>
> *When considering the focus of the Department, and the implementation of measures like the performance standards, I am bewildered. I have spoken to teachers in England who have found performance standards to be a thorough failure, and I cannot understand why our government would adopt something that is not working elsewhere. Implementing the standards will take up even more teaching time. Education is becoming more politically oriented and changes are occurring simply to satisfy the politicians. I try to practice what I preach regarding advocacy, and I write letters and arrange meetings with support centre staff to discuss the future of preschools.*

Teachers' diagrammatic representations of experiences

Bettine's perception of her work is diagrammatically presented in Figure 1. These issues were emphasised throughout her journal and interview discussions. Elizabeth's diagram of her work identifies the influence of many complex issues at each of the three levels. She has emphasised concerns related to meeting the needs of children with special needs, lack of support, workload pressures and political policies and constraints. Elizabeth's diagram is presented in Figure 2.

Reflections on the stories

The stories of these two teachers illustrate the effects that changes in educational structures and in the wider society have had on teachers' daily experiences. The role of the preschool teacher in Queensland is in a process of redefinition.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Bettine and Elizabeth believed that it was becoming increasingly difficult to meet their personal expectations about the role of early childhood education. The need to 'fight for the profession' was put forward by Elizabeth. She valued providing exciting learning environments for the children within an event-based philosophy of learning but her routine for planning this was becoming more and more crowded with other work demands.

Bettine and Elizabeth experienced more demands and responsibilities than they could comfortably handle. They were finding it difficult to integrate their work into the primary school organisational structure because they were used to considerably more independence and autonomy. They were unclear about their roles in relation to their associated school.

Predominant in the stories is that the role of early childhood teacher has been affected by the elimination of the Preschool Directorate in the Queensland Education Department. The loss of representation and practical support previously provided by the Department had resulted in feelings of powerless to contest school and social demands.

Coping with change and the work of preschool teachers

Kelly and Berthelsen (1995) produced a description of the sources of stress for preschool teachers. The major distinctive themes were time pressures, responding to children's needs, coping with non-teaching tasks, maintaining early childhood philosophy and practice, meeting personal needs, issues with parents of the children, interpersonal relationships, and attitudes and perceptions about early childhood programs. These issues are evident in the stories of Bettine and Elizabeth.

The effect of removing the advisory support staff and disbanding the Preschool Directorate has had a major impact on preschool teachers in Queensland. These teachers' stories indicated that the support previously provided by advisory teachers had been invaluable to them. This was especially true with respect to meeting the needs of children with special needs. These teachers currently feel ill-equipped to do this effectively.

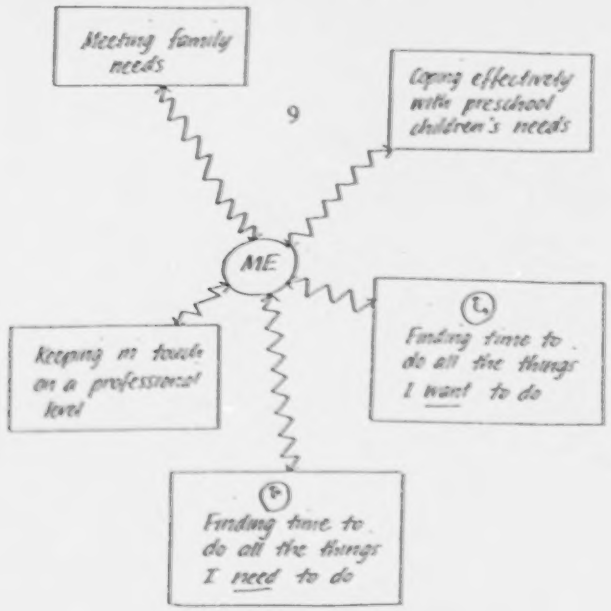

Meeting family needs
Coping effectively with preschool children's needs
ME
Keeping in touch on a professional level
Finding time to do all the things I want to do
Finding time to do all the things I need to do

Figure 1: Bettine's diagram of work influences

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Ignorance of the developmental process and orientations of the preschool and of early childhood education
Community Attitudes
Fragmented Families
Time demands
Parent / Teacher Partnership
Policies and Actions of the Department of Education
Meeting the needs of children who have special needs
Availability and quality of support
Physical Demands
Workload Pressures
Administrative Leadership

Figure 2: Elizabeth's diagram of work influences

The 1990s has seen the reversal of the original framework and the foundations for developing preschool education in Queensland which was promoted in the 1970s. The professional autonomy of preschool teachers has been eroded, and the valuable support networks and advisory teams has also disappeared. These teachers believe that the field of early childhood education needs a voice at senior levels for input into higher-level, decision-making so that valuable early childhood philosophies and practices are not eroded in the broader educational system.

Rather than being reactive to the changes and pressures, teachers need to become more proactive. This may not be easy. Teachers need to be assertive and be able to articulate their concerns. Action may restore a sense of personal control. Many of the issues that these teachers faced were related to working effectively with other adults, including principals and parents. Teachers need to work collaboratively within their school context in order to build up support networks, as well as seeking professional supervision within their school. They also have a role to support their colleagues who may feel equally disenfranchised.

Teachers can focus on areas of their practice where they feel confident that they can make a difference. Dalton and Boyd (1992) proposed that teachers need to have the courage to be a part of an increasingly complex and demanding profession in which change is a constant. An acceptance of change and an awareness of the situations over which they do and do not have control is required. Instead of choosing to feel overwhelmed by the pressure of external forces, teachers need to focus their energies on the things they can do something about. From that base, they then may be able to enlarge their spheres of influence. Maintaining such a focus may help teachers to manage change so that it does not become overwhelming.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

REFERENCES

Ashby, GF (1980). Preschool Education in Queensland, Australia. In LG Katz. (ed.), *Current topics in early childhood education.* New Jersey: Ablex Publishing Corporation.

Dalton, J & Boyd, J (1992). *I Teach: A guide to inspiring classroom leadership.* Armadale: Eleanor Curtain Publishing.

Hollingsworth, S (1992). Learning to teach through collaborative conversation: A feminist approach. *American Educational Research Journal*, 29, 373–404.

Jordell, KO (1987). Structural and personal influences in the socialization of beginning teachers. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 3, 165–177.

Kelly, AL & Berthelsen, DC (1995). Preschool teachers' experiences of stress. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 11, 345–357.

Kuzmic, J (1994). A beginning teacher's search for meaning: Teacher socialization, organizational literacy, and empowerment. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 10, 15–27.

Paget, MA (1983). Experience and knowledge. *Human Studies*, 67–90.

Queensland Department of Education (1990). *Focus on schools: The future organisation of educational services for students.* Brisbane: The Department of Education.

Westwood, P (1991). A shrinking service (editorial). *Australian Journal of Remedial Education*, 23, 1.

AUTHORS

Alison Kelly, Lecturer, Faculty of Education, Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane. Specialisations: Early childhood teacher education; teacher stress and organisational change; teachers' work; early childhood teachers in child care.

Donna Berthelsen, Lecturer, Faculty of Education, Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane. Specialisations: Child care and children's developmental outcomes; staff experiences in child care.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE